



## **MEDIA RELEASE**

**For immediate use**

### **Bird of the Year flies into King Shaka International Airport**

**Johannesburg, 11 September 2013:**

The White-winged Flufftail is a small, somewhat mysterious bird species. First described in 1877 from Potchefstroom, the knowledge gained about this bird has in the ensuing 136 years been minimal. The White-winged Flufftail is listed regionally as Critically Endangered and considered to be on the brink of extinction.

It is estimated that there are only 50 birds left in South Africa and perhaps only 250 throughout its global range. This species is today only known to occur in South Africa and, nearly 4000 km away, in Ethiopia. In South Africa the species has been recorded from approximately 15 sites, although several of the records are vague. The sites where the flufftail has been “regularly” recorded are at Middelpunt, near Belfast, at Wakkerstroom, Mpumalanga, and at Franklin Marsh, KwaZulu-Natal.

In his 1906 publication “The birds of South Africa, Volume 4”, Sclater wrote that a certain A. Millar informed him that the White-winged Flufftail, then known as the White-winged Crake, is to be found in the vleis around Durban. Sclater continues to state that this is one of the rarest of South African birds. In 2003, Barry Taylor described the only other record of White-winged Flufftail in coastal wetlands, at Mfabeni, St Lucia, KwaZulu-Natal.

After more than 100 years without any new confirmed sightings, scientists started to question the records of White-winged Flufftail found in the vleis around Durban. The observations of Millar were, however, confirmed on Thursday 5 September 2013 when Marius van Rooyen, Senior Wildlife Control Officer, located a flufftail at King Shaka International Airport. Van Rooyen says, “An airport staff member found the bird alive alongside a close-mesh fence along a road lining the main runways about 09h00 this morning and handed it over to the Wildlife Control staff.” The Wildlife Control staff took it to their office where it was photographed. Being unsure about the species’ identification, van Rooyen forwarded photos to David Allan, Curator of Birds at the Durban Natural Science Museum. Before Allan could confirm what the bird was, it was released at the site where it was found. Allan, knowing how extraordinary any sighting of this species is, rushed to the site just minutes after checking the photographs.

In an attempt to relocate the bird for blood and feather samples to be taken for important genetic work, the surrounding grasslands/damp wetland was subsequently searched, but without success.

According to Dr Hanneline Smit-Robinson, “the aim of a recent trip to Ethiopia, undertaken by BirdLife South Africa and the Middelpunt Wetland Trust, was to obtain blood and feather samples for genetic and isotope analyses. Seven flufftails were caught and released back in the wetlands near Addis Ababa”. Blood and feather samples can help to better understand whether the birds move between Ethiopia and South Africa or whether the two populations are isolated.

Smit-Robinson further says, “through the involvement of BirdLife South Africa, the Middelpunt Wetland Trust and the Ethiopian Wildlife and Natural History Society, measures are to be put in place to conserve this enigmatic species. First we need to understand more about this bird. It is only with a better understanding of its movements and habits that we can implement effective conservation measures.”

When taking into account the number of sightings over the past 100 or so years, the chances of locating a White-winged Flufftail at King Shaka International Airport are very slim. With the numbers being so low, the bird located last week could be one of the last of this species in South Africa, and possibly even in the world.

**For further information, please contact:**

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**Notes to Editors:**

- The White-winged Flufftail is BirdLife South Africa’s Bird of the Year. Bird of the Year is one of BirdLife South Africa’s annual initiatives for creating awareness about birds and bird habitat conservation. For more information: <http://www.birdlife.org.za/events/bird-of-the-year>
- On 4 September 2013, one day prior to the sighting at King Shaka airport, BirdLife International announced that the White-winged Flufftail will be uplisted to **Globally Critically Endangered**, subject to acceptance by the IUCN. This will be the second South African species to be listed as Globally Critically Endangered. The revised global red list will be published in November and a formal press release will follow.
- Things are not looking too rosy for the White-winged Flufftail in South Africa, with its wetland habitat threatened by mining, pollution from industrial effluents, domestic and commercial sewage, acid mine drainage, agricultural runoff and litter. Ethiopian wetlands are threatened by overgrazing and grass-cutting and this may explain why the White-winged Flufftail is not known to breed at other sites that could, potentially, provide suitable habitat, but where overgrazing has eliminated suitable nest-building habitat.
- Read more on the BirdLife International Preventing Extinctions Programme at <http://www.birdlife.org/extinction/> and <http://www.birdlife.org.za/conservation/threatened-species>

**About Birdlife South Africa**

- The vision of BirdLife South Africa is to promote the conservation, research, understanding, observation and enjoyment of natural birds and their habitats.
- Birds are important environmental indicators, the proverbial ‘canaries in the coal mine’. By focusing on birds, and the sites and habitats on which they depend, BirdLife South Africa aims to improve the quality of life for birds, for other wildlife and ultimately for people.
- BirdLife South Africa is the largest non-profit bird conservation organisation in the country. It relies on donor funding and financial support from the public to carry out its critical conservation work.
- For more information, visit [www.birdlife.org.za](http://www.birdlife.org.za)